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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes an instructional approach based on a student-designed and constructed model of a city and describes how this approach was used in a college-level sociology class on ethnic relations in the city. The approach is called 'City Building.' The major objective of this approach is to bring social life into the classroom. Students using this approach are directed to solve futuristic and complex problems using the objects in the model environment. The responsibility of the instructor using the City Building approach is mainly to play a facilitative role as consultant. Advantages of this approach are that it enables students to experiment with the concept of physical space so that it becomes relevant to their needs and experiences, become involved with architectural planning, understand the influence of physical space on human behavior, gain appreciation of both man-made and natural objects in the environment, and gain a concrete understanding of the social world upon which sociological abstractions regarding urban life are based. Features of the sociology course based on City Building included a contract specifying grading criteria, class participation, activities, assignments, and responsibilities of students and teachers: fieldtrips to different types of communities: and simulations to encourage group solidarity and consensus regarding the type of community which would be built. Student evaluations of the course based on the City Building approach revealed a high degree of interest and appreciation that there was an actual representation of sociological concepts which are generally only relayed verbally. (DB)

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THE CITY AS INSTRUCTIONAL TOOL IN NEW DIMENSIONS OF LEARNING

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THE CITY AS INSTRUCTIONAL TOOL IN NEW DIMENSIONS OF LEARNING

> The American classroom is dominated by what has been called the rule of two-thirds--two-thirds of the time someone is talking and two-thirds of this time it is the teacher, and two-thirds of the time that the teacher is talking, she is lecturing, giving directions or criticizing behavior(Sommer, 1969:99)

The complaint has frequently been made that college classes are no different from high school classes in terms of the behavior expected of students. In both of these places students are told what to think, what to read, and what assignments to do while they learn to sit in quiet disinterest listening to one-way communicated lectures. How unfortunate that learning can be so uninspiring even with the best of classroom facilities and the most well-intended instructors? However, we already know that textbooks alone are not the key to learning. Students read the textbook sparsely if at all, and instructors must make deliberate attempts to motivate students to read them(Geertsen, 1977:116). Even if they are being graded on their readings, the student still tends to read only a few beginning chapters of the textbook(Friedman & Wilson, 1975). America's schools pride themselves on quality education, yet sociology students are not learning more advanced levels of critical thinking as they develop further in their sociological training(Logan, 1976:37). This could be partly the fault of the instructor who may have lowered his standards of teaching over the years, but it tends to say more about the learning environment and the way students are motivated to get involved in education.

Over the years, a number of educators have tried to develop

innovative ways of teaching at the elementary, secondary, and higher education levels. While many experiments have not been successful or were not replicable because of the need for special conditions of learning, a few experiments have worked and their models have been replicated. This paper is concerned with describing a new approach to education that meets the challenges described above. The approach has been applied to a sociology class and a good portion of this paper will analyze and describe what took place there. However, the main goal of this paper is to demonstrate the uniqueness of the learning experience that this approach offers and to show how it can be used in sociology classes.

The approach being referred to is called "City Building", a simple enough concept but one that is far reaching in application. Basically it is an instructional method whereby students build an actual city in the classroom and use this model as the basis for learning various subject matter. Developed by Doreen Nelson of the Center for City Building Educational Programs, the method attempts to bring social life into the classroom and to have students solve futuristic and complex problems using the city model as a site for learning(Nelson & Buerger, 1977). When the idea of "City Building" was first developed, it was applied to elementary school teaching where children could actually build a three-dimensional city as part of their regular classroom activities. A few years later, it was adapted to college level instruction where it offered the challenge of making the idea of three-dimensional city building attractive to adult students. Grown-ups, after all, rarely

participate in cutting, pasting activities, and fantasizing behavior in an ordinary learning situation. Knowing this, plans were made to train college faculty to learn city building ideas and apply them to a team-taught course they would be offering at a future date.

Why the focus on the city as a learning tool? After participating in City Building training workshops, it was not difficult to see the usefulness of this idea. After all, an image of the city is what is familiar to everyone; they live in it, they work in it, they die in it and they are surrounded by it in so many ways that one cannot list all the possibilities. However, like most things in which one is immersed, we grow accustomed to the familiar and take these things for granted. This is what may be responsible for the blase personality that is said to characterize "urban man"(Simmel, 1950), and the anonymity and impersonality that governs relations in an urban area with high density, and heterogeneity(Wirth, 1938). City Building is a way to make the city appear humanistic and malleable which is why it is a useful educational tool. It enables the individual to practice encountering the physical environment on a personal level and to make it relevant to his own life experiences. As a previous observer of the city, the individual can now play an active role in perceiving the world and have a creative part in developing his image of it(Lynch, 1960:6). The individual should also have the power to change that image to fit changing needs. This is what City Building philosophy encourages since the whole idea of learning is based on what the individual can do with the objects in his environment.

One aspect of the city is the physical space that is used to create the urban structure. By using the city as a learning tool, students can experiment with the concept of physical space making it relevant to their experiences. They will also find that the way space is used for people will give a tone to communication, accenting it or even overriding the spoken word (Hall, 1959:204). This is because we use our physical space to make social space more meaningful by setting up barriers to insure privacy or taking away structures to facilitate interaction. Through space utilization and object construction, students can get involved in architecture according to the City Building personnel. Architecture, as a field, is said to suffer from impersonality and a lack of concern for human behavior within the architectural structure. According to Sommer, designers are too concerned with either the buildings of the past or of the future while ignoring buildings of the present and from the standpoint of user behavior(Sommer, 1969:4). The City Building instructional method avoids this impersonality in traditional architecture by making the city come alive in a humanistic way. It becomes the place where behavior can be studied as well as culture, values, roles, and attitudes. It enables the student to manipulate the environment in ways that contradict the idea that the city is an alienating, impersonal and anonymous place.

The following is a brief summary of the author's interpretation of the major City Building teaching strategies:

1. Acquiring an understanding and appreciation of both man-made and natural objects in the environment so that individuals can see the relationship between:

A. The individual and the object

B. The individual and an organization

C. The individual and the organization, the community, and the environment.

2. Developing a concept for "teaming" so that instructors will be able to teach City Building from more than one discipline.

3. Constructing three-dimensional objects. The object should have meaning to the individual, and it should be constructed in a way so that the individual can transform it, i.e. enlarge it, change its shape, change its function. Enlargement has the advantage of enabling the individual to get inside the object and to role play the object in an interview situation.

4. Simulating or role playing with three-dimensional objects. This role playing, game situation involves the manipulation of physical objects in the environment. A styrofoam structure, called "Instant City", has been used to quickly create a city environment appropriate for simulation exercises.

5. Constructing a three-dimensional city. This is a miniature model of a city built to as near scale as possible. The actual model is a composite of smaller land parcels on which individuals construct and which are later assembled to create the whole city.

These teaching strategies were applied to a jointly taught ethnic relations course involving both the author and a philosopher. Before going into the details of this course, a brief summary of the advantages of using such an approach will be mentioned. The advantages can be generalized to other types of courses and disciplines, but they are specifically mentioned here in the

context of sociology courses that emphasize learning through the use of three-dimensional objects.

A. As a method of learning, City Building is a natural way of perceiving the social world. In sociology, as in other disciplines, many things are studied abstractly but in actuality, social phenomena have their basis in concrete reality. Emile Durkheim was trying to make abstractions appear tangible by calling them social facts which exist in their own right and are measurable(Durkheim, 1964). In the City Building approach, one can simply start with the concrete social world and teach from there the concept of social fact.

B. The method helps students to better grasp a social concept that deals with environmental concerns, i.e. racial segregation.

C. It enhances student learning by allowing them to physically create and manipulate objects of social concern.

D. It opens up a whole new area of learning that students in the past have not had access to because of traditional methods of teaching, i.e. use of textbooks and written exams. Students can become aware of their physical environment which opens up all sorts of possibilities for experimentation and innovative learning.

E. Students have a major role in their own learning. They participate in the class through role playing, decision making, and manipulation of the physical and social environment. The instructors play a facilitative role as consultants. This minimizes the threat of instructor dominance and makes the student feel more in control of his education. Yet it does not leave

the class structure completely in the hands of the students as in the Rogerian self-directed model of learning(Miller, 1976:83-8).

F. The student learns about alternative ways of doing things and perceiving the world. This may be called a futuristic orientation since much of what takes place in City Building learning is directed toward change and the consequences of change.

G. The student's knowledge and understanding of the social world becomes more wholistic rather than fragmented which has the advantage of making learning more efficient and meaningful (Lembo, 1969:151). He or she can relate the material to every part in its entirety as when he works with other students to study an entire city with all the problems and conflicts that would exist on a small scale in the society. The wholistic awareness is developed gradually, after the course of students working on their own independent parcels of land which they later bring together as a group to create an entire city. This expands their perspective of the social world.

These advantages can better be seen and understood in the context of an actual course. What follows is a description of a sociology class that was taught utilizing the City Building themes and basic components.

An Application of the City Building Concept

A team-taught course entitled, "Multi-ethnic Relations in the City," was taught in the Small College, an experimental program at California State University, Dominguez Hills. The course had several unique features among which include the use of outside consultants who participated in the class, the negotiation and development of a contract between students and

faculty, and several building projects created within the classroom.

Since the City Building method is concerned with the actual construction of a city, the instructors acquired the assistance of two architectural consultants who met with the instructors before the course began and participated in the course at various periods. Their expertise was especially valuable in helping the students acquire an awareness and understanding of the concept of scale and of the relationship between objects and environment.

A career consultant was also available to assist the class. Since the City Building philosophy attempts to integrate the ideas of organizations, individuals, and the community, careers are very important in all phases of the course. Careers are also a good way to introduce the concept of social role in an environmental context which is one of the ways that the area of City Building links up with sociology.

Contract Building

On the first day of class students were informed that their involvement in the course would be specified according to a contract that would be negotiated and drawn up. This meant that there would be a set of guidelines for such things as grading criteria, class participation, activities and assignments, and the students' and instructors' roles and responsibilities in the course. A contract was agreed upon by the class and it was used as a set of guidelines throughout the course. The purpose of a contract of this type is to have students fully knowledgeable of what they are getting into and to be aware of their responsibilities. The student, after all, is crucial in facilitating

his own learning so he should help to structure and shape the form of his education. Also an understanding and clarification of roles and responsibilities is necessary so that the proper learning environment is established early in class and developed with consistency. The contract is not irreversible or unchangeable. It is simply a set of expectations on the part of both students and instructors that help to establish trust and understanding about a new undertaking. This is not too different from the idea of developing a self-concept in education where students identify values to guide their behavior(Miller, 1976:49). However, while students learn to identify who they are and what they want, they also become aware that they are members of a group to whom they must be responsible.

Fieldtrips

These were useful in linking the outside world to the course and tying together diverse elements that had something in common. They were basically an additional teaching strategy that exposed the student to the physical environment and various aspects of the city. A fieldtrip out to a nearby industrial community took place early in the course to prepare the student for parcel land ownership which would result from the construction of an individual class project. The city that the students would eventually build on a miniature scale would be a representation of the community that was visited. There were also fieldtrips to an ethnic cultural center to see a play, and a visit to St. Elmo Village which is an imaginative Black artist's workshop with exhibits of creative works done from discarded objects in the former slum environment.

Basic Themes of the Course

The integration of political power, careers, and ethnicity in an urban environment was the objective of this course. These themes were brought out in various ways such as by playing a Psychology Today game called Blacks and Whites to show economic power between ethnic groups, by creating a power structure within the class through the development of a form of government, through the selection of career roles during role playing sessions, and by the creation of a future city with a diverse ethnic population having its own rules of behavior, statuses, government roles, and physical structures.

The basic ingredient of the City Building strategy, which is to provide three-dimensionality in teaching, came out early in the course as the instructors went over the class project. This was the creation of an ethnic community that the student was to build on a cardboard parcel of land. Each individual parcel would later be integrated into a total composite which would form the above mentioned "future city." The entire Quarter was spent working on this project both in class and at home, and the students became very immersed in the activity of building. This was a creative process in itself because students were learning how to manipulate physical objects while trying to maintain some modicum of scale. The parcels were roughly 30 inches by 40 inches and were cut out from an enlarged map that represented a section of the community the class visited. The materials for constructing the city were anything that materialized from home cupboards or surplus stores. Students brought in all types of discarded but functional objects that they shared as a group, i.e.

empty milk and egg cartons, ice cream sticks, pipe cleaners, styrofoam pieces, etc.

The Development of Group Solidarity

As the students began to build their "future city," it was possible to hear important issues being raised such as, "Where are all the people going to live? How will my population be fed? What types of laws will there be in this city? How will I know if my neighbor will want a road going over into his neighborhood? Who will govern the communities?" This last question came up again and again and was the single most important issue to resolve. This was because the further along the students went in building their communities, the more they realized that some consistency in standards and rules was necessary just to keep the group in order. A composite city, after all, does require cooperation from everyone and the sooner the consensus was established, the better.

In raising these important questions about their communities, the students were beginning to develop an awareness of events and individuals outside their own cut-out parcels. It was necessary for them to do this because their own parcels would be affected by what others did and they in turn would be affecting others by what they built on their own land. The idea of ownership then began to have a much wider ramification that required group interaction and decision making. This is where the issue of a community government came in.

It was interesting to watch personalities clash among the students and to see philosophies vary when the idea of governance arose. However, the necessity of a set of rules and standards

finally forced the students to compromise with each other and elect a formal governmental structure. This turned out to be a government consisting of the entire class and with a philosophy that blended some of the current modes of political-economic thought. The class called it "capi-socialism"; a system that combined socialism with capitalism. This structure of governance later helped to define the type of community they would set up as a composite which would include a wall street and a core of socialistic living patterns scattered throughout the city.

It was impressive to watch how the students grew as a class during the Quarter who could not only work together but also learn to agree on basic issues. Rarely does one see group solidarity of a Durkheimian nature develop so fast in a classroom, but the small size(fourteen students) of the class and the strong leadership were instrumental in producing it. The leader was almost ousted at one point because he proved to be doo domineering for the class. However, he was later reinstated as an equal after he and the class had a confrontation.

The group solidarity was most noticeable during a simulation exercise using the City Building game, "Instant City." This was a styrofoam model of geological land formations put together to make a 5' x 7' formation. The students constructed a community on this land formation and simulated such community roles as mayor, city council member, engineer, etc. The instructors acted as an invisible power structure giving out commands for the community to follow. At one point when the demands were unreasonable, the students got together as a group and resisted the orders. Their "organic solidarity" developed into a

primary group cohesiveness at this point which was unusual to see in a university class even of this size.

Heightened Learning Experiences

The fact that the students were able to confront each other about delicate issues that affected their internal harmony was a good sign, indicating that they had taken on a responsible role in their learning. However, what brought out much of the discussion and critical insight about social issues was the role playing in a model city environment. This happened mainly during the last phase of City Building instruction which was the simulation of a "Future City" as well as during the "Instant City" simulation. Role playing, according to Miller, is useful in developing sensitivity in students to the feelings of others as well as helping individuals to learn about their own culture and the subcultures of others(Miller, 1976:70-71). This was clearly what happened in the class as students began to resolve issues of ethnic living patterns and dominance. In addition, simulation games are said to help make abstract concepts meaningful by quickly, effectively and dramatically providing students with experiences of everyday life(Bredemeier, 1978:411). This was visible in both the "Instant City" game and "Future City" since they provided students with realistic roles to enact and problems to solve.

During the organization of "Future City" students could see how their individual parcels fit together with all the other parcels like a puzzle to represent the real community they had visited earlier. However, this community was changed drastically due to the creative imaginations of the students and their ability to be future oriented. In addition, ideas that would never be brought up in a traditional course could be expressed here without

embarrassment because the students were able to act out the community life they had invented. Students were asked to explain their parcels and the consequences of what they had built. This resulted in much hearty discussion because the students had already built something to stimulate their thinking. Now all that remained was to express endless possibilities of how social relations in an ethnic society could be shaped, changed, or revised. The visual product of a miniature community seemed to heighten the learning experiences of the students and in the following ways:

A. Students could demonstrate the ideas they intended to express by pointing to the physical objects in the model city or by actually moving or building them.

B. Students could understand what was being relayed by others verbally because there was an actual representation of what was said.

C. Intimate interaction and awareness of others and their abilities could take place because students were asked to share their products. This opened the way for criticism but also support of each other's ideas. The competition was then diverted from the grade and directed instead to individual demonstrations of knowledge and expertise.

D. The grade did not appear to be of great issue at the end of the Quarter because the emphasis was on developing creative insights into ethnic relations in a futuristic environment. This type of emphasis seemed to reduce the usual student anxieties that go along with exams or paper assignments because there was no exam, and the one paper that was required was a highly

individualized piece of writing. As a result, the student was able to concentrate most of his or her effort on learning. The student was also asked to hand in exercises but these were de-emphasized in the grade. They were used mainly to help them develop an awareness of the environment, careers and ethnic relations.

Thus the students were able to really play the role of learner; they were not just passive thinkers. They could experiment with their physical environment without feeling threatened by external constraints, they could interact with others knowing that there was a definite goal to be reached, and they were able to learn subject matter in a unique and creative way. This is what the City Building teaching strategy offers and tries to apply to many different disciplines. Though it is still in its experimental stages, the ideas it offers would work very well in sociology classes such as urban sociology, ethnic relations, demography, and social stratification.

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